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ABSTRACT

Based on similar studies conducted in 1978 and 1983, this paper provides information on changes in state department of education (SEA) evaluation units over a 5-year period and an update on current conditions. In brief, there appears to have been substantial reductions in the size of SEA evaluation unit staffs. While the majority of studies continue to be conducted inhouse rather than contracted out to external consultants, far fewer evaluations are being performed. Although the variability across units in terms of size of staff and number of evaluations conducted seems to be decreasing, the individual units still respond to a diverse set of multiple responsibilities, from consultation to evaluation monitoring to policy analysis. These units would like assistance in providing better services through improved database maintenance, study design, and problem formation. In addition, they continue to cope with the perennial problems of insufficient funds and lack of trained staff. (Author)

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No. 96 EVALUATION UNITS IN STATE DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION: A FIVE-YEAR UPDATE

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May 1984

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PREFACE

The Research on Evaluation Program is a Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory project of research, development, testing, and training designed to create new evaluation methodologies for use in education. This document is one of a series of papers and reports produced by program staff, visiting scholars, adjunct scholars, and project collaborators--all members of a cooperative network of colleagues working on the development of new methodologies.

How have the evaluation units in state departments of education changed in the last five years? Have there been changes in their staffing patterns and in the nature and amount of their work? Answers to these and related questions are provided in this report which summarizes the results of two surveys (one in 1978, the other in 1983) which investigated the nature of state department evaluation operations. The report ends with information on the projected needs of these evaluation units over the next few years.

Nick L. Smith, Editor
Paper and Report Series

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EVALUATION UNITS IN STATE DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION: A FIVE-YEAR UPDATE

In order to understand and improve the practice of educational evaluation, it is essential that we study the setting or context within which that evaluation takes place. We cannot adequately train or select evaluation staff if we are not familiar with the environment within which they will work. We cannot improve evaluation management until we understand the organizational context of evaluation units. We cannot develop effective evaluation methods unless we know the purposes and settings in which they will be applied. Increasing the impact and utilization of evaluation requires knowledge of organizational influences, communication patterns, and decision making procedures. The majority of educational evaluations take place within one of two organizational settings: local education agencies (LEAs) or school districts, and state education agencies (SEAs) or state departments of education. We must understand these settings if we are to improve the evaluation that takes place within them. This paper focuses on the SEA evaluation setting.

Until recently, information on LEA and SEA evaluation settings was based primarily on personal experience or anecdotal reports. Increasingly, however, there have been survey studies of these settings (cf. Lyon et al., 1978; Caulley and Smith, 1978), studies of organizational influences on evaluation (cf. Bank and Williams, 1981; Smith and Caulley, 1982), and even national descriptive studies (cf. Boruch and Cordray, 1980; Raizen and Rossi, 1981). This brief research note adds to that growing collection by reporting results from a 1983 survey of SEA evaluation units. A study addressing similar questions had been

conducted 5 years earlier in 1978 and the 1983 information is compared with that earlier information. In addition to providing descriptive information on a few important characteristics of SEA evaluation units, this paper also suggests how those characteristics may have changed over the past five years. Certainly the success of our efforts at evaluation training, management, methods development, and improvement of practice will depend in part on the stability of the settings within which we work and our knowledge of them.

Study Results

In 1978, a phone survey was conducted of the directors of evaluation units in 25 state departments of education (Caulley and Smith, 1978; Caulley and Smith, 1980). The thirteen western-most states were included in the study as well as a random sample of 12 of the remaining 37 states. The results therefore represented a reasonable cross-section of all 50 states but were biased in favor of the "western condition." Of the 25 states contacted, 21 (84%) had centralized program evaluation units; all 21 units participated in the study.

In 1983, a mailed questionnaire survey was conducted of all 50 state departments of education. Of the 50 states, 37 (74%) had centralized program evaluation units and 29 of them (78%) provided data for the study. A non-respondent bias check suggested that the states not responding tended to have lower state populations and school enrollments than the responding states, i.e., these results are slightly biased in favor of the more populous states.

Although both studies were originally conducted for purposes other than those described here, they each contained similar questions allowing for a longitudinal study of the SEA evaluation setting. A comparison of the results of the two studies follows. The purpose of this presentation is to suggest possible ways in which the context of evaluation within state departments

of education may have changed in the past five years and to provide an up-to-date picture of some aspects of the current SEA evaluation environment.

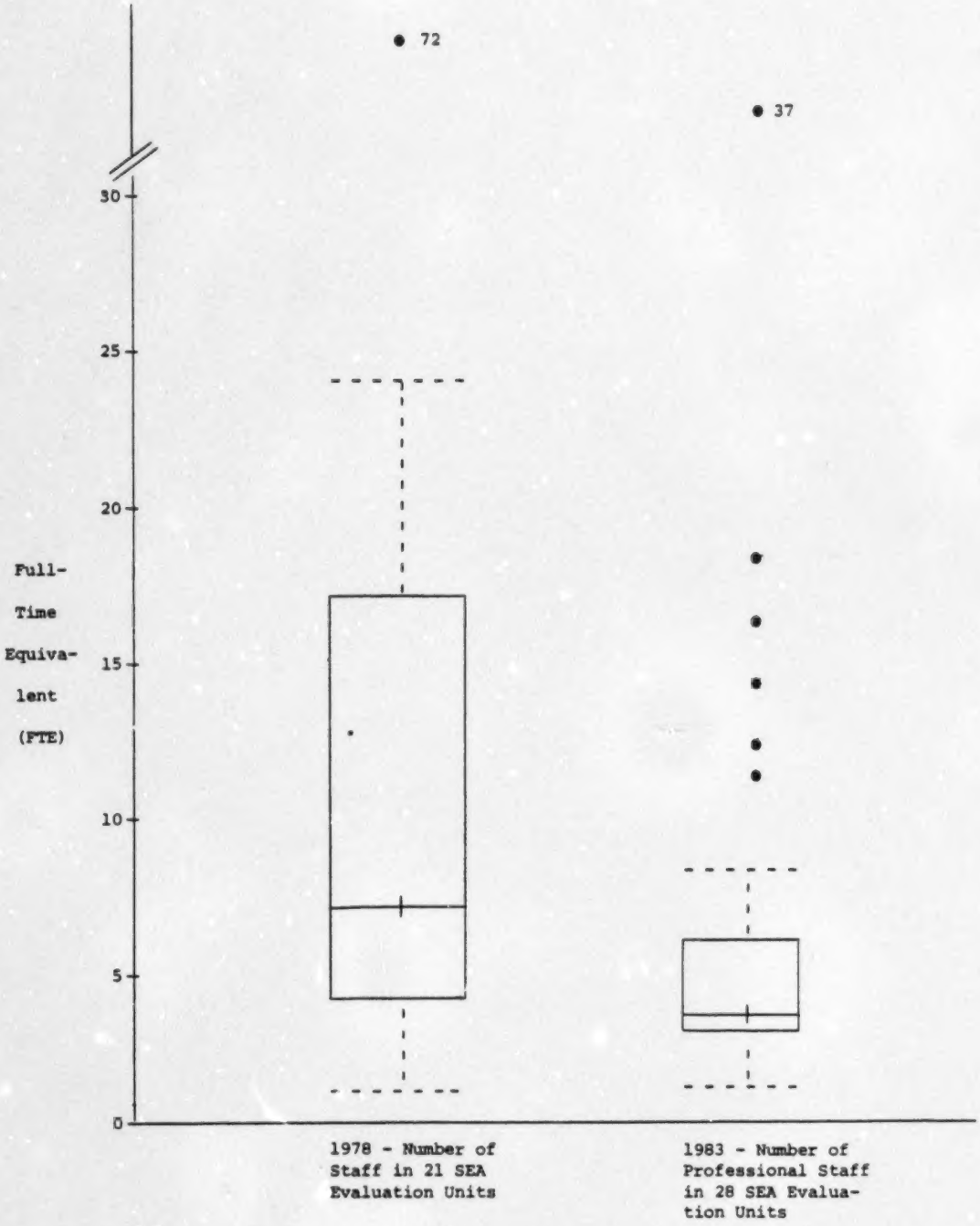
Evaluation Staffing

In both studies, SEA evaluation units were asked about the number of staff (Full Time Equivalents-FTEs) employed in their units. These data are summarized here using exploratory data analysis techniques for ease of presentation and interpretation (cf. Tukey, 1977; McGaw, 1981). The data on number of staff are graphed using box and whisker plots in Figure 1.

The median FTE in 1978 was 7, but only 3.5 in 1983 (the medians are indicated by the vertical hash marks on the lines bisecting the boxes in Figure 1). Fifty percent of the units had staffs of 4 to 17 in 1978 (i.e., fell within the box in Figure 1), but 50 percent had only 3 to 6 FTE in 1983. Ninety-five percent of the units in 1978 had staffs between 1 and 24; 95 percent had staffs of 1 to 8 in 1983 (i.e., fell between the whiskers in Figure 1)[1].

It appears that SEA evaluation units have undergone a dramatic reduction in personnel. Although other evidence supports the conclusion that these units have lost staff in recent years (Gray, Caulley, and Smith, 1982), these present data must be interpreted cautiously. A close examination of the original survey questions reveals that respondents were asked in 1983 about the number of professional staff in their units while the 1978 respondents were only asked the vaguer question of how many staff they had. It is not clear whether the 1978 responses reflect both support and professional staff or just professional. Staff size has decreased, but probably not as dramatically as this comparison implies. Incidentally, the extreme outlier state in 1978 (72 FTE) was still the most extreme case in 1983 (37 FTE).

Figure 1
SEA Evaluation Unit Staffing



Internal versus External Conduct of Studies

An important aspect of state department of education evaluation operation is the extent to which the unit employs its own inhouse staff to conduct studies or whether it subcontracts its work to external consultants and monitors their performance.

Data on the number of evaluation studies conducted inhouse by SEA evaluation units appear below in Figure 2. The data on studies contracted to external consultants appear in Figure 3.

A median of 24.5 evaluations were conducted inhouse in 1978, but only 8.5 in 1983. Fifty percent of the states did between 15 and 40 internal studies in 1978 compared with 4 to 20 internal studies in 1983. Similarly, the range narrowed for the other states; 95 percent of the states ranged from 1 to 72 inhouse studies in 1978, 1 to 21 studies in 1983. SEA evaluation units appear to be doing far fewer inhouse studies than five years ago.

The median number of externally contracted studies, zero, has stayed the same in the past five years. Figure 3 does illustrate a reduction in range for the number of external evaluations similar to that of the internally conducted studies, but the numbers are small. In general, SEA evaluation units do not subcontract many evaluations to external consultants, and those who do so are decreasing the number of such studies.

Unit Responsibilities

In 1978, the SEA evaluation units were asked what percent of their time was spent in program evaluation activities. Twenty units responded. They reported an average of 63.5 percent of their time on program evaluation, with two states spending 10 percent or less and six states devoting full time to program evaluation.

A more detailed question was asked in 1983. Units were asked to identify their major duties from a list of nine responsibilities. A summary of these data appears in Table 1.

Figure 2
Evaluations Conducted Inhouse

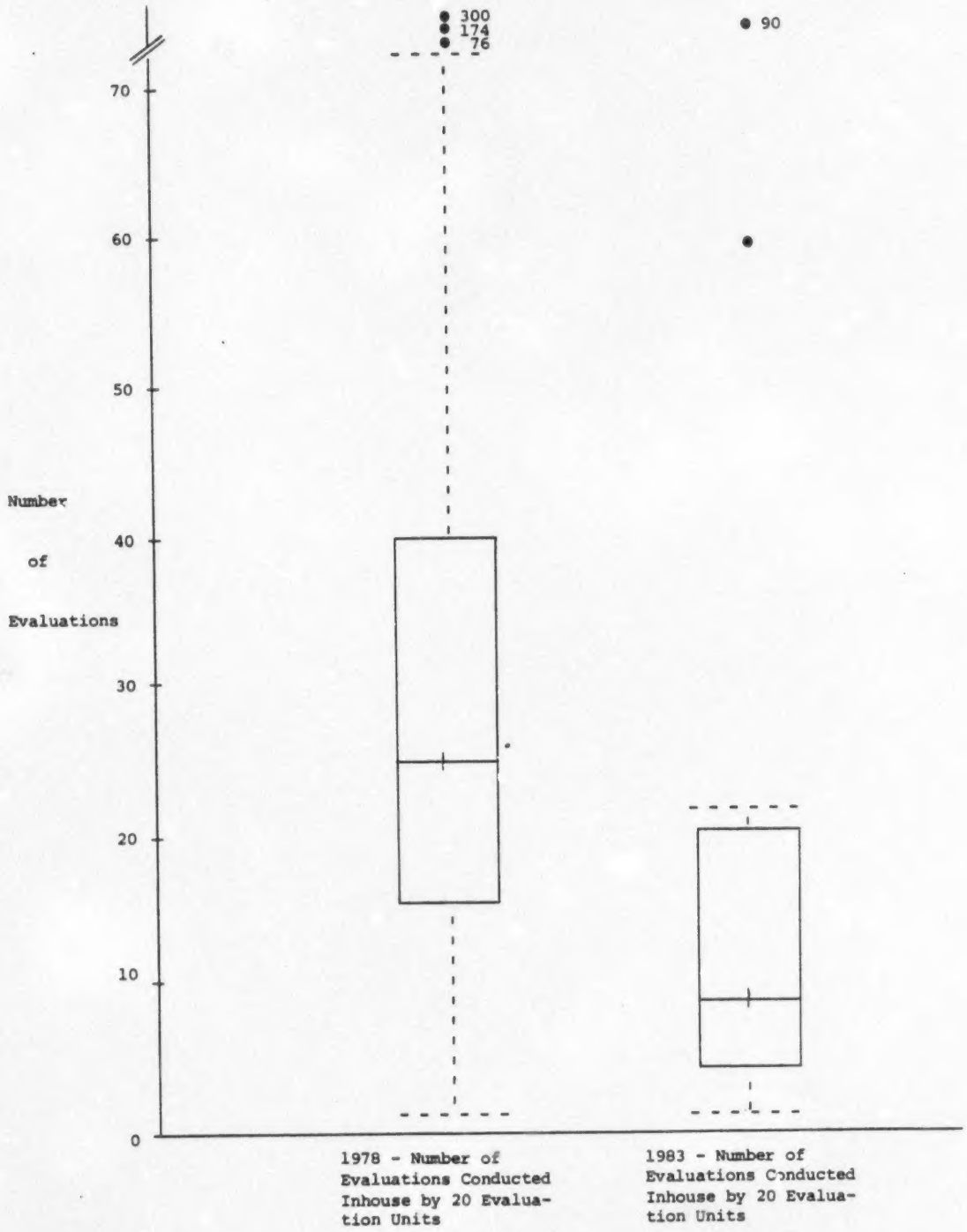
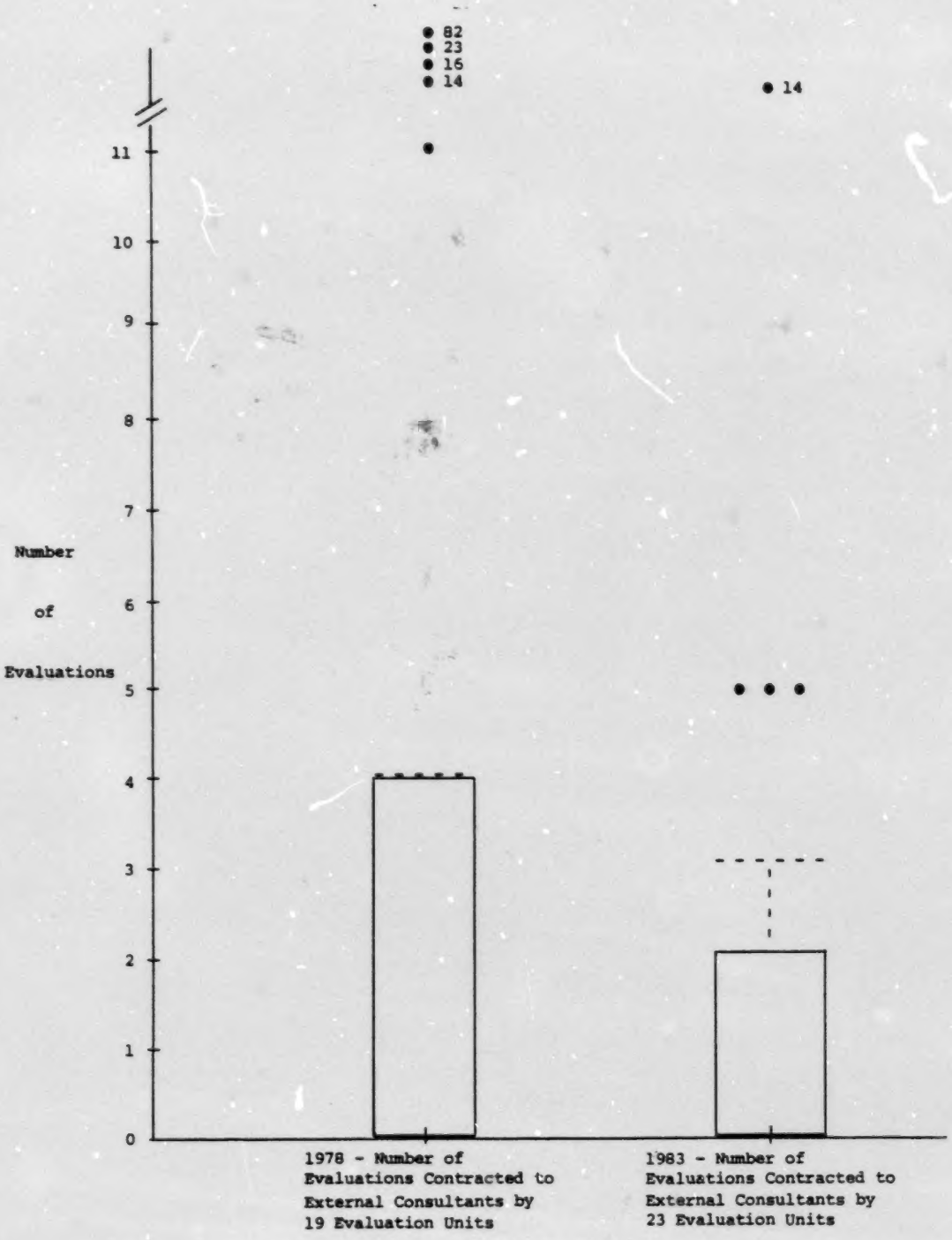


Figure 3
Evaluations Contracted to External Consultants



The units identified an average of 6 responsibilities each, with every responsibility listed being a major duty for at least half of the units. The two most common responsibilities were Consultation/Technical Assistance (92.6%) and Evaluation Studies (81.5%). Clearly, SEA evaluation units have multiple, diverse duties which vary across the states.

Table 1
Major Responsibilities of SEA
Evaluation Units in 1983

Responsibility	Number of States Citing This As a Major Responsibility (Percent, N=27
Consultation/Technical Assistance	25 (92.6)
Evaluation Studies	22 (81.5)
Needs Assessment	20 (74.1)
Information Provision	20 (74.1)
Evaluation Monitoring	19 (70.4)
Planning	18 (66.7)
Research Studies	16 (59.3)
Testing Program	15 (55.6)
Policy Analysis	15 (55.6)

Unit Problems and Improvements

In 1978, the evaluation units were asked to list their most prevalent evaluation problems. The 21 states responding identified their greatest problems as insufficient staff and/or too many evaluations (33%), lack of funds (29%), lack of time (24%), and lack of staff training (19%). An almost identical list resulted when the 1983 respondents were asked to name the major problems they anticipated facing in the next 3 to 5 years: limited funds (66%), insufficient and/or untrained staff (62%), and increased demands for evaluation (38%). Methodological problems were cited next most frequently (e.g., 1978--difficulty implementing experimental designs; 1983--need for more adaptive methods, need for computer methods).

While some aspects of evaluations within SEAs may have changed over the last several years, one thing remains the same--a major problem continues to be inadequate funds and insufficient numbers of well-trained staff to meet the demands placed on the units.

In 1983, each evaluation unit was asked to select those elements of the total evaluation process that it felt most needed improvement over the coming 3 to 5 years if the unit was to provide the best possible service. The responses to that question are summarized in Table 2. Over half of the 27 units responding said that Data Base Maintenance and Study Design would need the greatest attention. Problem Formation was a close third.

Table 2
Evaluation Elements Most Needing
Improvement Over the Next 3 to 5 Years

Evaluation Element	Number of States in 1983 Citing Element as Needing Major Improvement (Percent, N=27)
Data Base Maintenance	18 (66.7)
Study Design	14 (51.9)
Problem Formation	13 (48.1)
Data Collection	10 (37.0)
Information Reporting	10 (37.0)
Evaluation Management	9 (33.3)
Data Analysis	8 (29.6)

Finally, the 1983 respondents were asked what topics or activities should be the focus of state and federal research and development efforts to improve state level evaluation. The most frequently cited topics were methods, especially methods related to cost analysis (9), staff development (5), utilization (4), and political concerns (4).

Conclusion

Based on similar studies conducted in 1978 and 1983, this paper provides information on changes in state department of education evaluation units over a five-year period and an update on current conditions.

In brief, there appears to have been substantial reductions in the size of SEA evaluation unit staffs. While the majority of studies continue to be conducted inhouse rather than contracted out to external consultants, far fewer evaluations are being performed. Although the variability across units in terms of size of staff and number of evaluations conducted seems to be decreasing, the individual units still respond to a diverse set of multiple responsibilities, from consultation to evaluation monitoring to policy analysis. These units would like assistance in providing better services through improved data base maintenance, study design, and problem formation. In addition, they continue to cope with the perennial problems of insufficient funds and lack of trained staff.

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FOOTNOTE

[1]These computations are based on McNeil's (1977) recommendations for computing fence (and whiskers) placement. The fifty and ninety-five percent ranges discussed here are approximations based on assumptions of normally distributed large samples and are only used suggestively, acknowledging the problems of small sample sizes.